

Advent Devotional Guide

Lyndon Baptist Church



Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany
2023-2024

November 26 - Christ the King Sunday

Psalm 95:1-7a, Ezekiel 34:11-6, 20-24, Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46

On the Christian Calendar, the last Sunday of the year is Christ the King Sunday. It was originally known as 'The Feast of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.' On this day we are called to remember that Jesus Christ is King and Lord of the universe.

Christ the King Sunday was conceived in 1925, a time when the world was in turmoil, plagued by growing secularism, atheism, and ultra-nationalism in the aftermath of WWI. Pope Pius XI designated the last Sunday of October as a time for the church to remember that Jesus is not only Savior, but King over all the earth. While kings and kingdoms will come and go, the reign of Christ is eternal.

In 1969, Pope Paul VI moved the date of Christ the King Sunday to the final Sunday of the Church Calendar. In this position, at the end of the Church Year and on the cusp of the new Church Year, this observance calls us to remember the all-ready and not-yetness of the Kingdom of God.

The Apostle Paul reminds us, in our Epistle Lesson for today, that God has "put all things under [Christ's] feet and has made him head of all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." In our life we bear witness to the reign of Christ; we demonstrate what the peace of Christ looks like. We are a community who works and lives, looking forward to that day when Christ "hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and authority (1 Corinthians 15:24)."

Jesus Christ, our Lord and King, on this day, we confess that we have given ourselves to lesser allegiances. We ask for your forgiveness. As we stand on the cusp of a new year, we pledge ourselves anew to you and your kingdom. Amen.

Jim Holladay



November 27, 2023

Psalm 7, Esther 2:1-18, 2 Timothy 2:8-13

Remember 2020? We began it with great hope and optimism. As we prepared our church's 100th Anniversary the following year, we were looking back at where we came from. And we began to discern where God was leading us.

Then came Covid-19. In March we decided to cease gathering for a couple of weeks. Just until the crisis was over. Those two weeks stretched into months. It would be nearly a year and a half before we would resume services, which would pause again in fall 2021. We didn't have a "normal" schedule until January 2022.

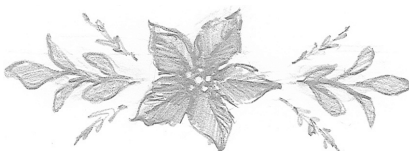
It was a frustrating time, compounded by uncertainty. How could we be the church without meeting together? How could we do ministry with the constraints of quarantine? We canceled our 100th Anniversary.

But we adapted. God had work for us, even in that limited environment. We invested in new technology that kept us connected from our homes. And through it we provided worship and Bible study to people around the world. We collected items for partner ministries while social distancing. We did not stop being the church. We found different ways to exercise our calling.

Paul in prison, in chains, writes to Timothy - whose ministry in Ephesus is being constrained by critics and false teachers. Paul reminds Timothy: in spite of the limitations circumstances may place on us, the word of God is not in chains, not constrained.

Lord, thank you for encouraging us to look beyond the constraints of our circumstances. Thank you for the joy of experiencing your unchained word. Amen.

Jim Holladay



November 28, 2023

Psalm 7, Esther 8:3-17, Revelation 19:1-9

John's vision in the book of Revelation contains an astounding image: "[F]or the marriage of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready". After God defeats all God's enemies, something will change in the relationship between Christ and his church. The relationship will become even closer, more intimate. Christ will wed the church.

What is John seeing?

The Apostle Paul often speaks of our "being in Christ" or Christ living in us. He encourages the church to become more like Christ, growing into the image of Christ. But this seems different from being wedded to Christ in the kind of relationship where the two become one.

What are we to make of this mystery?

John does not go into the details of the wedding, but he does tell us how we are to prepare for it. We are to spin the robes we will wear to this wedding by living faithful lives, "for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints."

We are called to bear in our very being the marks of His suffering love. In the face of Babylon's power to destroy life, oppress people, and garner power and wealth to itself, we are to be living witness to the power of God, manifest in the self-giving heart of Jesus. That is how we prepare ourselves for our ultimate destiny.

Lord, we look forward to the day when we will know completely, even as we are completely known. We pray to you, our bridegroom, "Amen. Come Lord Jesus."

Jim Holladay



November 29, 2023

Psalm 7, Ezekiel 33:7-20, John 5:19-40

Confession: I really did not want to write this Advent reflection. I tried my best to avoid it, but Psalm 7 kept calling me back. Even as I read it again and again, I wondered, *How am I going to say something edifying from a psalm whose general theme seems to be a call for vengeance? How does that fit with Advent and the Prince of Peace?*

The psalm begins with a cry to God for salvation from those who would “tear me apart.” But this plea quickly turns into imploring God to destroy his enemies. Believing God sees and responds to things the way humans do, the psalmist declares, “God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day.” He looks forward to God “making his arrows fiery shafts” into the means of destroying his enemies.

Where is the edification in that? How do we get from here to “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace . . . ?”

Then it hit me. The psalmist feels overwhelmed and helpless as his enemies threaten to destroy him. In pain and helplessness, he pleads for the only deliverance he can think of.

I’ve been there. Haven’t you? In my pain and hurt, I only desired God to inflict pain and hurt on those causing my pain.

Psalm 7 is an honest prayer. It reflects our common experience of being overwhelmed by evil and suffering, and our desire that God would avenge those afflicted. It reminds me that God invites us to bring that pain – in all its rawness – to God, trusting that God will do what is best for me and my enemy.

I give thanks to you, O Lord and praise your Name. Amen.

Jim Holladay



November 30, 2023

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, Zechariah 13:1-9, Revelation 14:6-13

Today our devotional reflections turn more directly toward Advent – that season of the Christian Calendar when we look forward to celebrating the First and Second Advents of Jesus Christ. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus inaugurates the Kingdom of God on earth, pronouncing God’s victory over sin and death. In Jesus’ Second Coming, the Kingdom will be established in its fullness on earth among humankind.

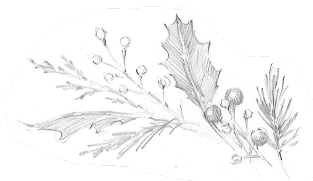


The message of the three angels in Revelation is both a warning and a call. It is a warning against being enticed by the wiles of the power structures of our world. Death and damnation will be found in seeking salvation, security, and life in any kingdom or authority other than God. People who are willing to take on the identity of nation, party, ideology, race or clan, etc., will drink, not the cup of salvation, but the “wine of God’s wrath.”

As we move toward Advent, we are reminded that this season is not only one preparing us for the celebration of the coming of Jesus, but a notice that we are to repent, to offer ourselves to the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit, and to remain faithful in our allegiance to God and God's kingdom.

O Lord, you have opened to us the way of life, the way of salvation. And that is a way we must walk with endurance and faithfulness, keeping our eyes focused on you and your purposes for the world. We look forward to that day, when your kingdom comes and we can rest from our labors. Amen.

Jim Holladay



December 1, 2023

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-1; Zechariah 14:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-18

Much of the urgency of Paul's missionary work stemmed from the conviction that Jesus would be returning within his lifetime. This belief was shared by many of the Apostles. As the eye-witnesses to Jesus began to die, people began to doubt not only the timing of Jesus' return, but the veracity of the gospel itself.

In Thessalonica, many of the original believers were dying. Those that remained had questions. Where had the dead gone? Would they be unable to participate in the Kingdom of God upon Jesus' Second Coming because they died before His return? Those left behind began to wonder about their fates.

Two thousand years later, their questions may seem odd to us. After all, we have developed elaborate scenarios about the future and life after death, most of which do not need Jesus to return. We barely pay lip service to the resurrection. We have made the future hope of salvation more about a great reunion in the sky than the kingdom of God coming on earth.

During this Advent season, let us hear again the great themes of God's intention to deliver all of creation from the shackles of sin and death. Let us celebrate the birth of the Messiah, the one who inaugurates the kingdom in our midst. And let us rekindle our desire for Jesus' coming again to fulfill our prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Lord, come to us anew this Advent Season. Help us to hear again the great story of your love and desire for the renewal of your creation.

Jim Holladay



December 2, 2023

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Micah 2:1-13; Matthew 24:15-31

“Restore us, O God, let your face shine that we may be saved.”

Three times the psalmist repeats this phrase. The first comes after calling upon God to “stir up your might and come to save us!” The second serves as a lamentation of Israel’s plight, having experienced the anger and absence of God. The third follows a reminder to God of His past faithfulness and a plea that God would repent of judgment and move toward renewal.

The theme of renewal runs through the Advent Season. Observed since the fourth century, our understanding of Advent has evolved through the years - in more than one direction. Some understand the major theme of Advent to be reflection on our sin and need for salvation, while others see it as a time of preparation for the coming of the King of Kings.

In his blog post, “Is Advent a Penitential Season?” John Grondelski reminds us that the need for the Incarnation was the need of humanity. In Ryan Reeves’ writing about Advent, he reminds us of its double focus. The first two weeks point toward the Parousia (Second Coming), while the last two weeks lead us to Bethlehem and Christ’s first Advent. Embedded in all four weeks is a reminder of our need for God to act for our salvation and the salvation of the world.

The earliest role Advent played in the life of the church was as a time of preparation for baptism by new converts. Essential to the character of Advent is exploring the mystery of God’s grace and our need; it is a time of examination and commitment.

Lord, as we enter this Advent Season, grant us the grace of self-examination. Give us the humility and courage to pray with the psalmist, ‘restore us, O God, let your face shine that we may be saved.’

Jim Holladay



December 3, 2023

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Isaiah 40:1-11, John 1:19-28

“Never make a promise you cannot keep.” This quote is simple, yet it carries a lot of weight. There are times that we mean to keep our words and deeds in promises that we make, yet circumstances in life have a way of making those promises fall short of their pact.

Therefore I take great joy in knowing that God’s promise to me is always kept, and my faith in his never failing promise that he will forgive my sins and remain steadfast each and every day of my life without fail. The best part of this promise is the simple action of just “letting go and letting God.” By doing so, we have his comfort, deliverance and everlasting love.

Though we sin against God and our faith is weakened at times by circumstances WE created ourselves, it is our faith in God’s PROMISE that he redeems us and is steadfast in each aspect of our everyday lives. We are called to “make straight the way of the Lord.” (John 1:23).

This means that we are now God’s witnesses to share his promise of Jesus to people’s lives and hearts.

Dear God, thank you for ALWAYS keeping your promise to us. Help us to remember that you have never failed us now or ever, and that we can hold onto that fact and rest assure that you will be by our side. No matter what. Thank you for loving us. -Amen

Shoshaunna Hoover Gragg



December 4, 2023

Psalm 79; Micah 4:1-5; Revelation 15:1-8

War– or rumors of it – have been around all my life. Greed and hatred have always led to violence in this beautiful world. Will we ever know peace? Will the killing ever end, Oh God? I have two sons, one of whom served in every war zone over the past 30 years. My father was killed in Europe during WWII. All the hatred in this world tears at my heart.

Being a widow, my mother had to find work. This left me in the care of my grandparents, Martin & Charlotte Burkholder. My grandfather was a retired dairy farmer, which gave me lots of land and buildings to explore. When he became ill, my grandmother had less time to watch over a small child. To boot, I was a curious child who always seemed to be into something I shouldn't. Yet God was always there and protected me. My father's brothers and cousins, who had returned from the war, watched over me and defended me when I got into too much trouble. We are all one of God's special children. But I was THE special child. And they were God's special helpers.

The summer before I began school, my mother and I moved to the town where she worked. We did a lot of hard work that summer getting me ready for the first grade. We worked on numbers, the alphabet (I always had a hard time with the letter S), and with hard work, love, and patience, I was at the top of the class. This was because my mother pushed me. In the same way, God pushes us to try harder, to do our best to show others His love.

Father God, thank you for Your love and patience with us, Your special children. Help us to share Your love in words and action to those around us. Thank You for putting Your special angels in our lives. Amen

Dora Vanderhoof



December 5, 2023

Psalm 79; Micah 4:6-13; Revelation 18:1-10

The Psalm passage speaks of pagan nations conquering the land and defiling God's Holy Temple, leaving Jerusalem a heap of ruins. The psalmist cries out to God for help, seeking vengeance on their neighbors for the harm done to God's chosen people, promising to thank Him forever and ever from generation to generation.

In Micah, God promises that He will gather together all His people, that He will make them strong and deliver them from exile. He tells them to rise up and destroy all the nations so that all the wealth that they have been gathering will be as offerings to God. Above all else, God is offering His chosen people hope and the promise of a new life in Him.

In Revelation we learn that Babylon, the great city of passionate immorality, "will be utterly consumed by fire, for the Lord God who judges her is mighty." Other nations, who have followed her way, will stand aside in disbelief. God is asking His people to leave, to avoid all contact with those in Babylon and to return to Him.

In all these verses, God is asking His people to have faith in Him, to return to His ways and to trust Him. He will protect them against all those who are trying to destroy them.

Heavenly Father, may we always stay close to You, to not stray into the ways of the world, but to follow Your words and Your ways. May we always seek to be more like You in all our ways. Amen.

Tim Vanderhoof



December 6, 2023

Psalm 79; Micah 5:1-5a; Luke 21:34-38

As I write this devotional, the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza is getting more violent. To-date, 1,400 Israelis have died in the October 7th attack by Hamas, and 5,087 Palestinians have died in Gaza. Peace seems to be a distant hope, and may only come with destruction.

Considering the history of continued violence and unrest in the Middle East over the past century, is there any realistic hope for peace between these two nations? Tensions continue to increase, and each cycle of violence seems to leave us wondering what is to be done.

In the midst of the violence and tension, as we read the words of the prophet Micah, we recognize that we have been promised the hope for peace from this exact part of the world. From Bethlehem will come one who will bring peace to the ends of the earth.

As Christians, we understand that Jesus, born in Bethlehem, is the Prince of Peace, the one about whom the angels sang, “Glory to God and on earth peace.” But how can Jesus bring peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, not to mention the whole world?

That will come only as people are willing to acknowledge that Jesus is the way to life and peace. It is only as people are willing to hear the call of Jesus to love God and neighbor – and to pray for enemies – will the vision of Micah come close to being fulfilled.

Only as we are willing to fulfill our calling to bear witness to the Prince of Peace will the world see the hope we have for peace as a real possibility.

Lord, we pray for peace in our time. And we pray that you would make us instruments of your peace in our world. Amen.

Jim Holladay



December 7, 2023

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Hosea 6:1-6; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

Pondering how to write the devotion for Psalm 85 on this beautiful autumn day, I realized how much the psalmist of long ago was writing about our time. The people were wanting God's deliverance from exile.



We as a nation have not been taken to another country, however, I do believe we have voluntarily exiled ourselves from God.

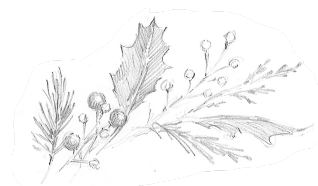
In the last verse, the psalmist speaks of God's grace, love, and assurance of renewal. As II Chronicles 7:14 reminds us, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land."

May this be the prayer of all of us.

Dear Father, May we seek your face, ask forgiveness, and look for your divine leadership in our lives and our country.

AMEN

Sandy Hoover



December 8, 2023

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Jeremiah 1:4-10; Acts 11:19-26

Jeremiah tells us that God not only knows us but knew us before we were born. He knows us even when we don't know ourselves. God thought about each of us and planned for us. A question arises: does He also consecrate and appoint all of us to specific vocations/work within His kingdom? Based on the passages, God's plans for us were taking shape even as we were taking shape.

We often struggle with new challenges due to feelings of inadequate ability, training, or experience. Yet we are capable of many things that we often do not realize. When you find yourself avoiding something you are called to do, be careful not to use self-confidence as an excuse. When God gives a job to do He will provide all that is needed.

When you feel discouraged or inadequate, remember God has always found you capable and has a purpose for you. We are not too young or old to know that in God our lives are given meaning and purpose.

"I don't sing well enough to be in the choir!" What matters is your call to sing God's praises. "I'm too old to teach children in Bible Study!" God calls us to guide and nurture children so they may grow in faith and discover their own callings.

Ponder and pray regarding: What does God have in mind for me? What or where is He calling me to?

God, help us remember that when you call, we should respond knowing you will equip us despite our self-doubts.

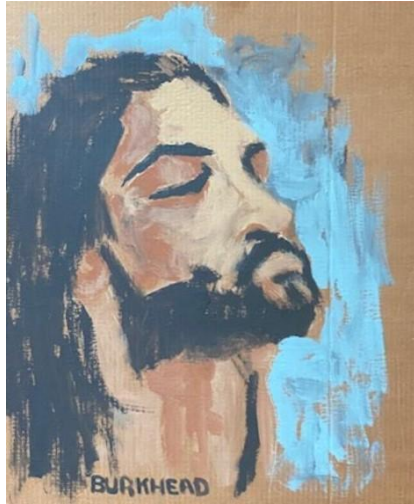


Jack Rodgers



December 9, 2023

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Ezekiel 36:24-28; Mark 11:27-33



I hear God's voice through the Psalm passage: "I forgive sin; turn to me in your heart for peace; my righteousness looks down from the sky and makes a path." In this I see a picture of Christ. In my dark nights and when I feel 'way out in left field' I want the peace of Christ to fill me so that I can make sense of my relationship to God and others. Once again this Christmas, we can join with the angels as recorded in Luke: "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors." They told the shepherds not to be afraid and gave them purpose and directions to see God's glory on earth. Can you picture righteousness and peace kissing each other on the face of Jesus?

Apparently the Jewish religious leaders in the first century did not see peace in Jesus. According to the Mark passage they were filled with other directions to find God. The Ezekiel passage had foretold that God would give His people a new heart and new spirit. Their minds and souls were invested in practiced tradition and crowd control. They knew they were in a dark place but chose to be afraid. After Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection all people have the choice of God's peace. We sing with the psalmist that God's glory will fill the land that he had given Abraham and echo with the words of Psalm 24, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it."

Heavenly Father, Thank you for making it possible to walk with you and to find favor through coming to our rescue in Jesus.. As you are transforming our hearts with the forgiving flow of your blood and the power of your presence may your love flow freely through us and bring the hope of peace to others. Amen

Nancy Polhill



December 10, 2023

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13; Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Mark 1:1-8

The Lord has promised us that things will not always be as they are, and that imminently “all things will be made new”. We all look forward to the new heaven and the new Earth, but do we really believe it is good news to proclaim that one day everything ends? How is it good news to cry out from the mountain tops that all flesh is like grass and our time is short?

Endings bring us sadness, grief, or regret. The end of a friendship, being fired from a job, leaving a dream unfulfilled, the closing of a favorite restaurant. Endings are also often joyous occasions, signifying the first step toward a new beginning. The end of high school begins our adulthood. We say goodbye to an old beloved car only and discover the joy of air-conditioning. We hold a loved one for the last time so that they can say goodbye to their suffering and be held by God forever. The sweetness of a new beginning rarely takes away the bitterness of a painful ending; it simply brings with it joy.

Peter reminds us not to ignore “this one fact”, that the Lord is patient with us. Even though our lives are like fading flowers, the life that God gives is forever. God’s promises will come to pass, and it makes no difference to God if that takes one night or a thousand years. God then treats us with love and concern as he is making all things new, including you and me. We see the ways in which God tarries and stays the day of His coming, so that we might come to know, experience, and share His full and complete loving kindness to us.

Dear Lord, grant us your peace as we navigate our lives that feel shorter as they grow longer, and help us to accept that all good things are gifts and graces from you as we give back to you our lot by sharing it in love with others.

Derek Harris



December 11, 2023

Psalm 27; Isaiah 26:7-15; Acts 2:37-42

The first verse of Psalm 27 lifts my spirit and lets me know where I stand – and where God stands in my life. Do I get distracted by the ways of the world? YES, but I always return to God in which my salvation lies. In verse 14 it says “Wait patiently for the Lord. Be brave and courageous. Yes, wait patiently for the Lord.”

In Isaiah 26 we are reminded that God is a God of justice, and that we must listen to His warnings and keep from doing wrong so that we will not feel His wrath. Beware the ways of the world! Follow the Lord always!

And in Acts, Peter warns that “Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

God continues to give us hope if only we will repent and turn back to Him! He has never broken His promise to us, only we have broken our promises to Him.

Each day we are tempted to follow the ways of the world, to accept the easy way, to forfeit our beliefs and our values in order to achieve something valued by this world. DON'T DO IT! When you are tempted, pray! Pray that God will strengthen you, pray that He will protect you! That is His promise. Listen now to His words, do not wait until it is too late. REPENT!

Father God, You are our light and our salvation! Help us in our weakened state to always remember that all things are possible with You! Give us the strength and belief to follow You today and all the days of our lives. Amen.

Tim Vanderhoof

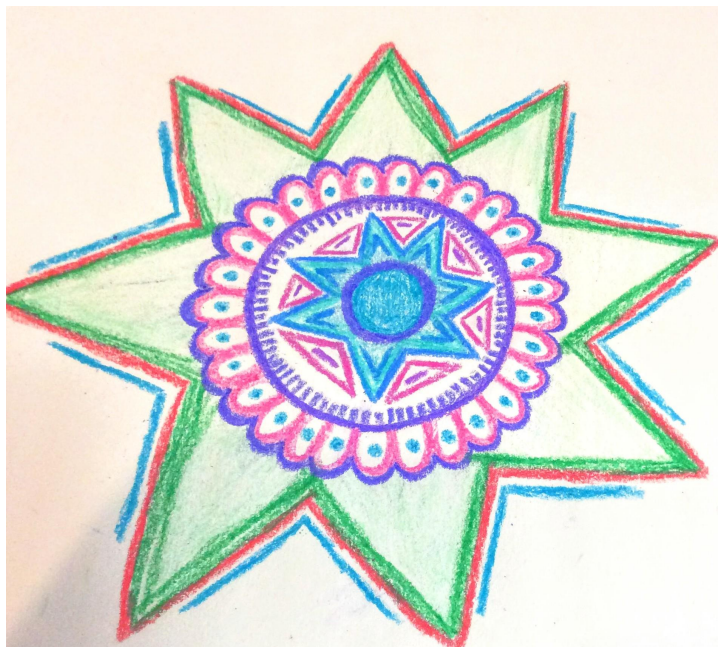


December 12, 2023

Psalm 27: Isaiah 4:2-6; Acts 11:1-18

Most of us have heard the phrase, "Faith over fear." How many of us have allowed our fear to overwhelm our faith? I certainly have and David the writer of this Psalm did as well.

David declared that God was the light, salvation and stronghold of his life of whom should he be afraid of or fear? David believed that no matter what came his way, God was his stronghold!



This is the same assurance we have. "God will NEVER leave us or forsake us!" Does this mean our lives are smooth sailing? Of course not. Our lives are filled with many fearful things like losing loved ones, our health, financial security and the list can go on and on. We have the VICTOR over all our fears - "The Lord is my light and my salvation, my stronghold of whom shall I fear." So we should never let our fear

overrun our faith.

God, you are the winner of every struggle and fear we have. Let us lay them all at your feet and strengthen our faith knowing you are our light in the darkness whom shall we fear. AMEN

Sandy Hoover



December 13, 2023

Psalm 27; Malachi 2:10-3:1; Luke 1:5-17

The writer of Psalm 27 invites to places of self-discovery about God's ordinary movements of creation. It is a matter of taking time and adjusting our sight to see them. According to the psalmist, God will not fail even when all else fails. This promise lifts us in hope and provides strength each day.

Luke presents the puzzlement, half-faith, and devotion to duty of a childless couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who prayed all their married life to be blessed with a child. Now well beyond child-bearing age, they are devout, ordinary people going about their normal business. But God regularly works through ordinary people going about their normal things. He reveals that despite their age they will have a son, just like Abraham and Sarah in Genesis.

At times in our lives we encounter problems that blind us to a way forward. Hope for the future appears to have hit a dead end. But though there may be possible detours for us, we worship a God for whom there are no dead ends. We have a God who is always working for good despite the messes we may make. We have a God specializing in making ways in the desert of life, opening a future where we saw none.

God's ways and timing often may not be apparent to us. We can be filled with doubt and tempted to despair. In God's faithfulness, despair becomes hope, doubt becomes faith, sorrow becomes rejoicing. God accomplishes his work through unlikely candidates like you and me.

God through your faithful fulfillment of your plan, you provided John to proclaim the coming of your son. Give us ears to hear your promises proclaimed and eyes to see your presence in all things. Amen

Jack Rodgers

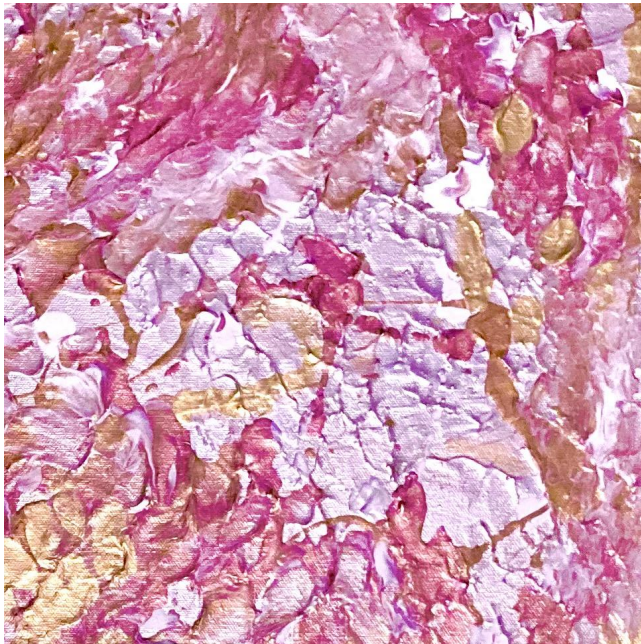


December 14, 2023

Psalm 126; Habakkuk 2:1-5; Philippians 3:7-11

Habakkuk opens with a complaint to God, and he does not mince words: “O Lord, how long shall I wait for help, and you will not listen?” Most of us feel the same when we hear terrible news, watch our family and friends struggling physically and emotionally, and experience pain in our own lives.

God’s reply to the prophet’s complaint begins with a reminder that “there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and it does not lie.” God’s reply instructs people how they are to live, that they are to remain faithful and live according to God’s righteousness while they wait on Him.



Advent is a time set aside for reflection, confession, and anticipation. Today’s passages challenge us to reflect on the following questions:
Are there things, priorities, desires, and even people in my life that take precedence over my relationship and commitment to Christ? What would it take for me to turn away from distractions and toward full commitment to God?

God of grace, open my eyes to see where you are forming me into an instrument for Your use. Guide me to set aside those desires that do not serve Your Kingdom’s purpose. Mold me into an instrument for Your use. Amen

Laurice Rodgers



December 15, 2023

Psalm 126; Habakkuk 3:2-6; Philippians 3:12-16

The world has and continues to experience a considerable number of conflicts: wars, natural disasters, and all the tragedies that come with them. Our neighborhoods and cities are filled with fear and our country is in a great deal of confusion and sadly divided. However, we need to focus on what God has done throughout our existence and the promises to redeem us. We need to show - better yet, people around need to see *in us* - what is like to be God's people and how joyful and grateful we are with HIM.

Habakkuk in his vision from God praises HIS power. It is a great reminder to us not just to praise him for HIS power but for all the things He has done for us.

How often have we forgotten to be thankful to God for the air we breathe, the colors we see when we first open our eyes?

The apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians and his words have been passed on to us to advise us and ask us to keep on pressing towards the ultimate goal. God has already given and showed us His love in so many ways, and for that we should be grateful. He has also promised us the glorified life after our natural lives.

It is not time to let go; rather, it is time to grab a hold of Him and follow Him. Continue to praise His mercy and be thankful Jesus came and died for us when we least deserve it to save us and to take us to the promised land.



Errol C. Morgan



December 16, 2023

Psalm 126; Habakkuk 3:13-19; Matthew 21:28-32

“May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.” This verse is comforting to me.

During this past year, the Lord has been my strength more than ever. Through countless struggles, both mental and physical , He has seen me through each day.

We all face challenges with uncertainty, and peace seems nowhere to be found. Only the peace of Christ that lives in us gives us calm during the storm, and we do not fear.

Every day I thank Him for the power to get through each day, and the ability to continue the work He has for me to do.

I pray for all of us every day. I know He always hears, even when I can't find the words. He has a purpose for all of us. We only need to trust in Him and follow.

Precious Lord, we thank you that you are in control amid all the turmoil in the world. That You give us the strength and assurance that we only need to rest in You and do Your will.

Donna Douglas



December 17, 2023

Psalm 126; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

I've got the joy, joy, joy down in my heart!

I remember singing that song as a child – in the innocence of childhood, the words made perfect sense. As I moved into adolescence, we still sang that song around the campfire at youth camp, but the angst of those years made our singing a little less enthusiastic. As I grew into adulthood, the song became a trinket of childhood that got left behind. The circumstances of the world around – and maybe within – me sometimes made the joy of that song feel like a distant echo.

Some days joy is hard to come by. I find myself struggling with Paul's admonition, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." I want to ask Paul, "How can I sing songs of joy and pray prayers of thanksgiving in a world so full of hate, violence, death, and destruction?" That feels a bit like telling me to whistle in the wind.

This is where the psalmist comes to my rescue. Notice the flow of Psalm 136. The first half treats joy as an act of remembrance, recalling "when the Lord restored the fortunes." The second half speaks of joy in terms of hope: "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy."

Remembrance and hope. The psalmist is clearly writing during a time of trouble and difficulty. In spite of that they recall the joy that has come and will come when God acts to deliver the people.

Lord, you are our joy, because you are our hope. May we find our peace in your presence alone. Amen.

Jim Holladay



December 18

Psalm 125; 1 Kings 18:1-18; Ephesians 6:10-17



Psalm 125 associates God with mountains and eternity: “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore.”

There is comfort in knowing God surrounds us always. As His children we have perfect protection all around us like the mountains surrounding Jerusalem. Trusting in God ensures strength in enduring, not just now, but always. Forever.

Have you ever struggled with saying or believing that God is always good, no matter what is happening? It’s easy when everything is going well, but our faith falters when trials of life occur and all seems to be crumbling around us. But God, even if we are not aware, is still good to us and present even as we are feeling consumed or overwhelmed by the circumstances. Paul in Ephesians 6 reminds us that we are in a spiritual war with the forces of evil in the world.

Paul then gives us actions we should personally undertake to be prepared. God’s presence is found in the armor of God. This armor surrounds and protects us, just as the mountains mentioned in the psalm. “A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.”

God, surround us as the mountains surround Jerusalem and grant your peace as we trust in you now and forever. Amen

Jack Rodgers



December 19, 2023

Psalm 125; 2 Kings 2:9-22; Acts 3:17-4:4

Trust in the Lord! For all who trust in the Lord will not be forsaken. As it says in Psalm 125, "The wicked will not rule the godly, for then the godly might be forced to do wrong." How true this statement is; if you let your mind dwell on worldly things, you can be swayed into doing wrong things. Satan makes it so easy! Focus all of your being on God and live in His way so that you may have quietness and peace.

Peter took the opportunity to tell those in the Temple that what they had done to the Lord Jesus Christ was done in ignorance. But he also advised them to turn from their sins and toward God.

In these three passages we are reminded once again to REPENT and to turn from our wicked, worldly ways and to listen to the message that God has for us. Why is that so very difficult for us? Do not the promises of God that state that we can have eternal life, full of happiness and peace mean so little to us?

As I grow older, I wonder about the many foolish things that I did in my youth. Do I have regrets? Yes, many! Yet I am now closer to God than I have ever been – and still ashamed of how far away from Him I still am. I must strive, with all my heart and soul, to draw closer to being the man that God created me to be. Could that possibly mean that I must REPENT every day? I believe that it does, because I want to stand before my Lord and Savior some day with a clean heart!

Dear God, forgive me for being a person who still is drawn at times to the ways of the world instead of following You! Instill in me a clean heart, one dedicated to serving You in this world even if it means that I must repent day in and day out in order to be Your servant. I trust in You to love me and protect me just as You promised to all Your children. Amen

Tim Vanderhoof



December 20, 2023

Psalm 125: Malachi 3:16-4:4; Mark 9:9-13

"On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground IS sinking sand."

When I read Psalm 125, the very first thing that came to my mind was the great chorus from the classic hymn, "The Solid Rock."

As Mount Zion surrounds Jerusalem, so does God surround us, his people, and he NEVER forgets us. This is His promise to us. And we can trust in Him alone and completely. God is our strength and refuge. Like a mountain, He is forever there, standing tall and strong. Like a mountain He surrounds a cool, gentle valley that we can take refuge in and seek His comfort, presence and guidance when we feel the weight of our own human troubles on our shoulders.

Though we are living in a dangerous, hate-filled world these days, God is ALWAYS good to those whose hearts are right with him. In verse 3, we are assured that "The fists of the wicked will never violate that what is righteous." God will round up the evil ones and protect Israel and His people.

All other ground IS sinking sand.

Dear Jesus, You are the solid rock on which we stand. We thank you and praise you for being our rock, and for your promise that you NEVER forget us and will always give us strength and safety. All we have to do is to turn our hearts to you and trust in you completely. Thank you for loving us unconditionally.

Amen

Shoshaunna Hoover Gragg



December 21, 2023

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; 2 Samuel 6:1-11; Hebrews 1:1-4

Hebrews opens with a reminder that God has spoken to His people in many ways throughout history. God's presence has been evidenced by His care for His people. God's love is demonstrated by Jesus' coming. Where do you experience God's presence? How are you reminded of His faithfulness? What does Jesus' coming to live among us mean for your life?

Centuries have passed since Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It is far too easy to live without consideration of Christ's return. Advent is a time when we reflect on the birth of Jesus and on the fulfillment of God's promise. It is also a time for us to remember that Christ will return, the Kingdom of God will be established. The fulfillment of Scripture will be realized. Do our lives reflect that expectation? Do our lives bear witness to the promises yet to be fulfilled? Are we aware of God's presence in our lives today?

God's love was present in the family that surrounded me as I grew. He has been present in counseling sessions when persons have wrestled with the challenges of life. The presence of God has been an integral part of my journey through cancer as a patient and as a family member offering support. Each day I try to reflect on where I have experienced God's presence.

Where have you experienced God today? Take a few moments today, and in the days to come to reflect on God's loving kindness and faithfulness.

Loving Father, you are my ever-present companion along this journey of life. Help me to see you in events and interactions of today. Guide me as I follow your will for my life. Your loving kindness sustains me today and every day. Amen

Laurice Rodgers



December 22, 2023

Psalms 89:1-4, 19-26; 2 Samuel 6:12-19; Hebrews 1:5-14

It was a pretty significant event. David chose 30,000 men to retrieve the Ark of the Covenant and bring it to Jerusalem. *Thirty thousand* men to fetch a chest! The Ark was a symbol of God's presence and covenant with Israel, though. So David went to extremes to ensure *nothing* would go wrong.

What happened when David successfully took off with the Ark in his possession? Did he treat the Ark as if it were as fragile as it was sacred? No. He danced. With everything in him.

David's absolute and complete joy at retrieving this holy symbol of God's covenant turned into a party, everyone dancing with all their might. I picture a whirling dervish, swirling wildly, with arms outstretched, eyes closed. Or even a ballet dancer hurtling herself across the stage, barely touching the floor with the tips of her toe shoes.

It is a vision of dancing before the Lord unashamed and unapologetic. We American Baptists have a bit of a love/hate relationship with dancing, often frowning at it as inappropriate. Yet there's David, dancing with all his might. Not just hopping around and wiggling his hips, but *dancing* with every bone, muscle, and sinew in his body. You can picture him, can't you? The absolute joy and ecstasy pouring out of him via cutting a rug, doing the hustle, rocking and bobbing – and an occasional pirouette.

What gets you out of your chair to dance in delight? Is it being reminded of God's steadfast love? Or something simple like watching leaves change color as the days shorten? Or the teeny, tiny fingers of a newborn child curled around yours?

Lord, teach us to dance. Amen.

Ruth Bellinger Holladay



December 23, 2023

Psalm 89: 1-4, 19-26; Judges 13:2-24; John 7:40-52

Christmas is coming - it's almost upon us! Children are filled with anticipation, songs are being sung, preparations are being made, and proclamations are being shouted. The whole world is atwitter

I felt this same excitement and joy reading king David's Psalm 89. A song of love and joy remembering God's abiding presence and steadfast love. God's promises to be with us forever through all things. Our God, strong, powerful, and faithful. Our God, the rock of our salvation, and One for whom we call, shout, and proclaim "our Father". Isn't this our joy at Christmas?

What a treat to reread the story of Samson in the book of Judges! To recount how God interacted and blessed his servants with a very special gift. A son is born. God blessed him as he grew. The spirit of the Lord stirred in him. We hear echoes of these verses in the Christmas story.

Our current times are not so different from the past. In the book of John we have the same collection of people we find in every crowd. Such a diversity of thoughts and beliefs, including those who want to challenge anything new. Some people could see something amazing in Jesus. Some are receptive to see, hear and receive a 'new thing' as God promised Isaiah.

Are we capable of letting go and receiving the new? Can we put away the old, former things of the past?

Heavenly Father, thank you for the joy of this Christmas season and the greatest gift of all that is of Jesus' Holy abiding presence. May we give as well as receive your peace.

Terry Burkhead



December 24, 2023

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

It doesn't take a Biblical scholar to find the common thread in today's passages from the Hebrew Bible: God promises that David and his descendents will always be king. There is no *quid pro quo* here; God's covenants are not transactional. He also does this *before* David commits both adultery and murder in succession! This serves as an important reminder that God's covenants will never be broken, even by the faithlessness of His people.

When I first read this, I was a bit stumped. The last king of Israel was Hoshea, whose reign came to an end in 722 BCE. That's hardly forever. And then, of course, Christ brings it all together. Jesus was a descendent of David, and he is the forever king. He is a covenant promise fulfilled to the absolute fullest.

There were 700 years of waiting between Hoshea and Jesus, though.

What would it mean if I had to go my entire life hoping God would deliver on a promise, only to leave the Earth before He did? Would I trust in the mystery of God, that He would honor his covenant? Would you? I think we would. I think we do, every year at this time.

Tomorrow we celebrate the birth of Christ. But we also celebrate His unbroken promise to return and redeem our world. The Kingdom of God is at hand, and He is working in us and through us even when we do not see it. Let us stay faithful and trust in the completion of that work.

God of faithfulness, we trust in your love and your promises, even in the face of our own doubt. Help us see that, though we don't always understand your timing, you will always be true.

Lindsey B Harris



Christmas Eve 2023

Psalm 96: Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

While reading the passages for this devotion, the hymn “Christmas Has Its Cradle” came to mind. The hymn reminds us that the Christmas season is not an isolated event. It is also not just a reason to have festivities and gatherings with friends and families. It is about God’s presence in our lives: His grace, love, and mercy.

Paul’s letter to Titus presents God’s unfolding plan of salvation in terms of two appearances of Jesus.

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all” speaks of Jesus’ first appearance. God’s plan begins with a birth and continues with Jesus’ earthly ministry, death, life, and resurrection. This is the hope of salvation for all in God’s plan.

The second appearance involves expectation: “While we wait for the blessed hope – for the glorious appearing of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.” A second coming. We are living between his life, death, and resurrection – which ushered in a new age of hope and salvation – and when it is fully realized through His return in glory.

Christmas Eve is a time to anticipate the beginning of God’s salvation for all of us. And continues, in expectation, to Jesus’ return. May you wait with joyous expectation.

Lord, may we seek good works not only in this holiday season, but year-round, seeking you daily, year in and year out “while we wait for the blessed hope and manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13)

Jack Rogers



December 25, 2023, Christmas Day

Psalm 98; Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-12; John 1:1-14

Paralleling the Genesis 1 creation narrative, John depicts Jesus as the "word" of God, co-eternal with God, one with God, present with God in creation (vss. 1-3). He is the source of eternal life (4). He is also the perfect light that the darkness of sin can never overcome (5).

The prologue continues with a brief summary of the life and work of Jesus. John the Baptist appears as the witness to Jesus and his being the life-giving light for all who share faith in him (6-8). The word came into a world which largely did not accept him, but those who did became children of God, children not born by normal human procreation but by the power of God (9-13).

All of this was possible because the eternal word of God came to earth, taking on human flesh and abiding with us. He was the ultimate revelation of the true and gracious God. In him we beheld the unique glory that belongs to God alone (14)

John's prologue is in many ways the most complete Christmas story. It points not only to Jesus' coming to earth but the reason he came--for our salvation. The conclusions of the other Gospels join it in this. Though they may begin the story of Jesus at different points, they conclude with the cross and resurrection. No celebration of Christmas is complete without remembering this.

Lord, we thank you for coming to earth in Jesus for our salvation. As we enjoy our Christmas festivities, remind us that they would have little meaning apart from your sacrifice in Christ to which his incarnation ultimately leads. Amen

John Polhill



December 26, 2023

Luke 1:46b-55, 1 Samuel 1:19-28, Hebrews 8:1-13

Mary is so excited! She is singing and dancing! God has chosen her over all others to give birth to his son, Jesus!

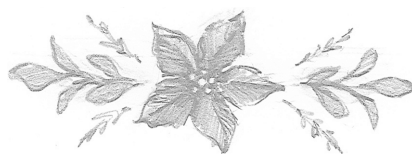
God knew Mary would be a good mother to Jesus.

God has shown great mercy to his people. He has knocked the bad guys off their high horses and then taken their victims out of the mud. The hungry he sat down at a table filled with all the food they wanted.

He remembered his promise to Abraham and it is coming true with this baby Mary is carrying.

Let us never forget the joy and gift of Christmas as Mary felt. Thank you for this gift. AMEN

Tonya Beams



December 27, 2023

Luke 1:46b-55, 1 Samuel 2:1-10, Mark 11:1-11

This past year I watched in fascination the royal coronation of HRH King Charles III where he became King of the British Empire and its Realms. All the pomp, circumstance, tradition, and grandeur of the ceremony was truly something to behold - especially the carriage ride to and from Westminster Abbey, where hundreds of thousands of people lined the streets to cheer and celebrate the new king.

In contrast, I read about Jesus' grand entrance into Jerusalem in Mark 11. Instead of arriving on a grand war horse, he rode on a simple colt. In place of a royal uniform bedecked with medals, a bejeweled crown or a sword, he wore his everyday clothes. And yet Jesus was given a joyous, royal welcome by the people on the streets in Jerusalem that day! They spread out their coats on the ground and laid palm fronds down for the colt to walk on, and shouted out, "Hosannah! Blessed Be the Messiah, Who comes in God's Name!"

King Charles III may be one of the richest, most well-known kings of our lifetime, but all his riches and power cannot do what the humble son of a carpenter can do for ALL of mankind...eternal salvation with him in the KINGDOM of HEAVEN FOR ETERNITY. Now that's that kind of king I want to serve!

Jesus is on a mission. Not to conquer peoples and land, but to restore broken humanity to its divinely created wholeness.

*I pray dear Jesus not for glory and honor, but to help you build your kingdom by helping my brothers and sisters find you. Lord let them know that the broken can be made whole. This is your divine will.
Amen*

Shoshaunna Hoover Gragg



December 28, 2023

Psalm 148; Jeremiah 31:15-17; Matthew 2:13-18

Turning to look at someone is so important. Looking at the person who is speaking demonstrates respect. It shows you are paying attention, listening to the words being spoken, and making meaningful connections. Our children, especially preschoolers, remind us to look at them when they are talking. They might even turn our face toward them if necessary! Turning to look at someone indicates we are giving our full attention to what is happening. The psalmist makes this request of God. See our need and save us!

Isaiah 64:1 – 9 repeats the message for God to turn to His people, see their need, see the people's repentant hearts, and hear their vow to not turn back from God. Isaiah expresses the plea for God to remember His people, as well as their acknowledgement of God's power.

Isaiah's words take us even deeper, inviting God to see us for who we are, to recognize our possibilities, and to shape our lives. He uses the imagery of a potter and his clay.

Under the skilled hands of a master potter, a lump of clay is transformed into a useful vessel. The work of a skilled potter is mesmerizing. The potter must guide each step of the process with full attention. A picture of the potter's hands has hung in my counseling office for many years as a reminder of God's work, molding us into vessels for His use.

"Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved." Mold me, make me, and fill me with Your Spirit. During this season of waiting, may I bear witness to Your love and grace, allowing others to see Christ through my life. Amen

Laurice Rodgers



December 29, 2023

Psalm 148: Isaiah 49:5-15; Matthew 12:46-50

The psalmist gives us a hymn of praise, celebrating God's sovereignty and glory over all creation, inviting all creatures, from the highest heavens to the lowest earth, to join in a chorus of praise to the Lord, who is the creator and sustainer of everything.

Calling out to mountains and hills, cattle and birds, even the sun and moon to praise the Lord brings to mind a cacophony of sound. Imagine the sun praising God – what would that sound like? Firebursts, perhaps? Cattle mooing, donkeys braying, frogs croaking, dogs barking, birds chirping, elephants trumpeting, fish...swishing, what a sound! The psalmist doesn't leave anything out, encouraging the very earth that God made to cry out in exultation, praising the very name of the Lord. How does a fruit tree or mighty cedar praise God? Or a squirrel or tiny ant?

It brings to mind the words of Fanny Crosby: "Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, Let the earth hear His voice ... And give Him the glory, great things He hath done" from her song of praise "To God Be the Glory". Even the earth, and all the things on it, hear his voice and respond to his majesty. How often do you find yourself simply praising God, expressing your joy and gratitude for the "great things he hath done"? Are you aware that the earth and all creation around you is, in its own way, lifting up in praise of his glory?

Lord, we praise you. We join the angels on high and the sea monsters below the waves in praising your name, with every breath we take. Praise you, Lord. Praise you, Lord.

Ruth Holladay



December 30, 2023

Psalm 148; Proverbs 9:1-12; 2 Peter 3:8-13

When I was a new Christian, I took “the fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom” literally. I was *terrified* of making mistakes before God. I was sure that following my own convictions and desires would infuriate him. So I prayed for wisdom. To my great surprise, I was not immediately imbued with perfect discernment. It turns out wisdom can only come through experience, time, and mistakes. A *lot* of mistakes.



The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but about the rest of the story? At the start of my relationship with Christ, it made sense for me to behold God’s power and authority. You can’t really start anywhere else. Likewise, the psalmist in today’s passage reminds us that only God’s majesty is over earth and heaven. But that’s only the *beginning*. The next chapter is this: God is love.

Mistakes before a God with all the power and none of the love would be terrifying! Mistakes before a God who *is* love are treated with love. And, as Martin Luther put it so bluntly, we will commit sins while we are here.

But that’s just the beginning. The rest of the story is that our loving savior will return and make all things new – no mistakes will be left. Until then, we will turn them into godly wisdom.

Thank you God for forgiving our sins and allowing us to learn from them. May we use our hard-won wisdom to prepare for your return. Come Lord Jesus.

Lindsey B Harris



December 31, 2023

Psalm 148; Isaiah 61:1- 62:3, Galatian 4:4-7, Luke 2:22-40

Have you ever wondered what we owe God for placing us on this earth? Is it not a primary obligation that we should bring praise to his name? That seems to be obvious enough, but how often do we actually praise our creator, apart perhaps from singing hymns in worship?

The writer of Psalm 148 gives us a vivid picture of what true praise of God involves. It includes heaven itself: angels, sun, moon and stars (1-6). It embraces all things on earth: plants and animals, the birds of the air, the creatures of the sea. Even inanimate things are to praise God: the weather, the hills, the mountains (7-10). Finally, and primarily, all humanity is to praise its creator (11-14).

Praise is expressed in two ways. One is to utter praise, as in song and prayer. The other is to bring praise by being praiseworthy, like a fine painting bringing praise to its artist or a beautiful song leading to praise for its composer. In the same way a majestic snow-capped mountain brings praise upon its divine creator, and we bring praise on God when we set a godly example by our manner of living or our service in His name.

Today is New Year's Eve. In celebrating the coming of the new year, nothing could be more appropriate than attending a service of worship or taking a prayerful moment to praise the God who grants us life every year, and no new year's resolution could be better than to resolve to live the kind of godly life that brings praise to our creator.

Almighty God, we thank you for leading us through another year, and we ask that you grant us your spiritual guidance and power to live a life that brings praise to your name throughout this coming new year. Amen

John Polhill



January 1, 2024, New Years Day

Psalm 8; Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:15-21

All these passages express one message: we cannot be silent in the face of God's presence, power, and love, and so we must share the blessing of His Son with others. We have hopes for the new year and look forward to possibilities and opportunities that lie ahead of us.

During our week at Chautauqua Institution this summer the chaplain of the week, Rev. Neal D. Pierce, focused on benedictions, the offering of "a good word", each day. We were invited to offer benedictions to each other and people we encountered throughout the day. We came to understand that words of blessing have power. They may even transform us.

Benedictions are offered as blessings offered to one another and remind us of God's presence with us.

Each Sunday we offer a word of blessing during the passing of the peace, expressing a message of hope and peace through words and hugs. Take a moment to identify opportunities you have each day to offer and receive a word of blessing. Reflect on the impact of those blessings on you, whether you are offering the blessing or receiving it. Consider how receiving a blessing reminds you of God's presence with you and how you are able to offer that reminder to others.

As we enter the new year there is no better blessing to offer, asking God to bless us, look on us, and grant us His peace. 2024 lies ahead of us with all its possibilities and promises. We cannot be silent! We must share the word! We have good news to proclaim!

Eternal Father, as this new year begins my desire is for others to experience your blessing through my life. Help me to share the good news with others and make me an instrument of Your peace. Amen.

Laurice Rodgers



January 2, 2024

Psalm 148; Proverbs 1:1-7; James 3:13-18

What is REAL Wisdom?

It is the way you LIVE, not the way you TALK that counts. LIVE WELL, LIVE WISELY, LIVE HUMBLY. Don't be full of mean-spirited ambition, twist the truth to make yourself sound wise or look better than others. Because when things fall apart, everyone ends up at each other's throats.



What wisdom is there in that?

Real wisdom is GOD'S wisdom. It begins with us living a Christ-like life by getting along with each other, treating one another with dignity and honor. This takes hard work, especially in our world today.

These past several weeks have been especially hard because of the war and violence taking place in God's holy land. It pains me to see how much of God's true wisdom is so needed in the area now.

If there was ever a time for real wisdom and peace personified, it is now, with God's REAL wisdom.

Dear God, It is my prayer that through you, ALL of us can learn to love our children more than hating one another, and treating each other with dignity, honor and SHALOM. In your precious name, Amen.

Shoshaunna Hoover Gragg



January 3, 2024

Psalm 110, Proverbs 1:20-33, James 4:1-10

Ah, Christmas. A time of peace on earth and goodwill to men. Spurred by our savior's love for all, we sing of love and joy, or comfort and joy, to our neighbors and enemies. We celebrate Christ's redemption of the world and His eventual creation of a new heaven and earth, where death shall be no more. We rejoice in a God who will bring the nations to justice, piling the dead bodies, crushing heads throughout the earth.

Wait, *what*?

The Bible does not shy away from violence. By the fourth chapter of Genesis there's already a murder. Our savior is savagely killed for our sake. Sometimes it seems like brutality is a core element of our religion, and I'm not sure I can make peace with that. I'm not sure I want to make peace with it. I'm not sure God wants me to make peace with it.

Every year I write at least one of these devotionals about my discomfort with the month-long Christmas celebration in America. We jump right into peace on earth without taking the time to comprehend what it is and why we need it. We act like it's already here. And I understand why. It's hard to feel despair over a world plagued by war when you're pretending everything is fine and focusing your attention on finishing your Christmas shopping. If we slow down and contemplate our world's collective longing for a savior, it will hurt. But we need that hurt because it reminds us that we still need our Prince of Peace. And that he will come again and make all things new. Every pang of yearning for his return is a reminder to pray and prepare.

God of Peace, give us courage to face the darkness of the world without despairing. Let us become peacemakers and proclaimers of your good news.

Lindsey B Harris



January 4, 2024

Psalm 110; Proverbs 3:1-12; James 4:11-17

Several months ago I realized I had become a walking rain cloud. I could find the bad in any situation. Without realizing it, I had grown into a person who pooh-poohed every suggestion of fun, anticipated the worst outcomes, and who had a problem with every single choice every person ever made. I was a real delight to be around.

I didn't mean to grow cynical; it crept up on me due to a lack of self reflection. Struggling with a variety of health issues and deep personal losses, I just gave in to the darkness. I decided that no one knew me better than myself, and I just knew I was going to be exhausted and sad for the rest of my life. You can see where this is going. There is actually someone who knows me way better than I know myself.

Through a compassionate but stern conversation with someone I love, God made it clear that no amount of sickness or grief gave me the right to predict my future with such surety. So instead of resigning myself to a miserable life, I decided to try and make it better. Whether or not things would improve was not for me to know or decide. And something amazing happened: I grew hopeful. My attitude changed and I committed to submitting the future to God.

It's easy to read James' words and see the sinful arrogance in predicting a prosperous and happy future. But confidently anticipating a sad future is just boasting while crying. We don't know anything about tomorrow, good or bad. Or the coming year.

Instead of saying, "2024 is going to be a hard year for me," I'm simply saying, "God willing, 2024 will be a good year." How are you submitting your future to God?

God of eternity, we entrust you with our past, present, and future.

Lindsey B Harris



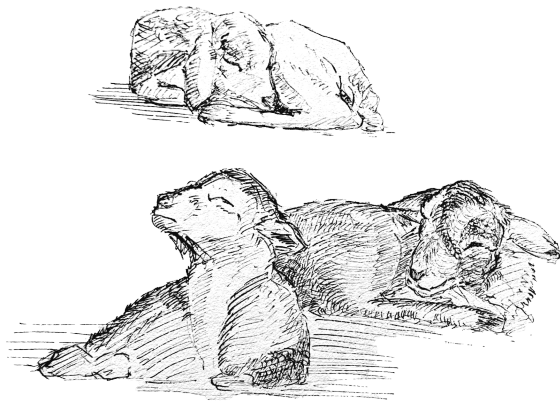
January 5, 2024

Psalm 110; Proverbs 22:1-9; Luke 6:27-31

I've been in church long enough to know that "love your neighbor and hate your enemy" doesn't fly. Jesus told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. And though it's sometimes maddening, I'm nice to my enemies (mostly) and I pray for them regularly. I even think nice thoughts about them! I'll take those stars in my crown now...

I work hard to make sure the love I have for my friends and family – my neighbors – is an active verb. I love my husband by leaving his keys and wallet where he'll see them in the morning. I love my mom by checking college basketball scores so I can talk to her about the games. I love my nephew by digging through hundreds of Pokémon cards at the local game store to find the ones he wants. Interestingly enough, I do none of those things for my enemies.

Jesus doesn't mince words when it comes to what he expects of us in terms of loving our enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you.



Nice thoughts are, well, nice. But on their own, they aren't love. What can you do to make 2024 the year you truly love your enemies?

As we remember your forgiveness of those who crucified you, we ask for your grace to treat those who harm us with lovingkindness, no matter the cost. May our radical love bring glory to Christ.

Lindsey B Harris



January 6, 2024 - Epiphany

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

As we conclude the Christmas season we celebrate that the light of God has broken into the darkness of the world and that the light was not just for His chosen people Israel. The light shines on and for all people everywhere.

People are the crowning achievement of God's creation. God made us "a little lower" than Himself and poured all of His creativity and love into us. Every person that you meet and every person that has lived and will live were made in the image of God. His plan for humanity is for us to live together in communion and fellowship with one another and with God Himself.



God exhorts His people Israel to "arise, shine" for He is shining on them – and from them – like a beacon in the darkness of our sin-savaged world. That light would be brightest and clearest through Jesus. "Kings will bow down before Him," but why? Not simply because He is God. Not merely because He is powerful. They will bow because God will deliver the needy and the weak. He will rescue them from oppression and violence.

Our call as the Church of Jesus is to continue to shine the light of Christ into the darkness. We do that best when we represent Jesus in the fullness of our human diversity. All people are called and welcomed by our God who is no longer a mystery, but is revealed and known as a friend in Jesus.

Dear God, help us to live the life of Christ as He has been revealed for the whole world. Let Jesus be our light and give us strength to follow His example of servanthood as we celebrate His love.

Derek Harris



January 7, 2023 - The Baptism of Jesus

Psalm 29, Genesis 1:1-5, Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11

The first Sunday after Epiphany is given to reflecting on the baptism of Jesus. On this day, we transition from pondering the ways that God has arrived in Jesus to considering the significance of Jesus' ministry.

Jesus' baptism is a pivot point. It begins with John the Baptizer proclaiming a message of hope and expectation, calling people to prepare themselves for the One who is coming. He ushers them toward a baptism of repentance to forgive their sin and make them ready for Christ, who would baptize them into the very life-giving power of God.

As Jesus comes up from the waters of baptism, the heavens part and a dove descends upon Him. God speaks and Jesus' identity as God's Son, His unique vehicle of self-revelation is affirmed.

It is this same affirmation on the lips of a Roman Centurion – "Truly this man was God's Son" – that summarizes Mark's understanding of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. We mustn't overlook the significance of the Centurion's profession. To utter those words about Jesus was to speak treason against Caesar. It is a recognition that in this very man he hung on a cross is the truth about God and God's purposes revealed.

So, here we stand with Jesus on the banks of the Jordan. Here we stand with the Centurion at the cross of Jesus. Are we ready to join Jesus in being baptized with the Spirit – to join Him in the baptism of death on the cross? Are we ready to accept the Son of God's claim on our lives?

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us.

Jim Holladay



Thank You

The staff of Lyndon Baptist Church would like to express our thanks to all the contributors to this devotional guide. Your hard work and effort have blessed us during this season. We hope that you have experienced blessing from the giving of your gifts.



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